

Measurable Postsecondary Goals

Ed O'Leary

These are my “thoughts” on what might be meant by *measurable postsecondary goals* and how teachers may want to write them. I know that the newly funded Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (STTAC) has been charged with helping states with Indicator 13 which includes measurable postsecondary goals and am confident that the Center will add further clarification on this issue.

Possible Intent of Measurable Postsecondary Goals

I think we need to keep in mind that today, special education is all about demonstrating results. It is all about results, and the results we need to show are postschool results. We should be able to determine how well we, in special education, did in preparing students for adult life based upon where students would like to go and what they would like to do once they have completed their secondary education. The postsecondary goals of the student should be stated in such a way that we could measure the extent to which the student has been able to achieve what they set out to do and the extent to which the education system did a good job of preparing students for the next step in life.

Systems vs. Individual Student Measurement

I believe that it is critical that we keep in mind that there are two distinct and different perspectives of measurability regarding measurable postsecondary goals in student IEPs. One perspective has to do directly with the student (i.e., the extent with which an individual student has been able to demonstrate improvement and achieve their stated postsecondary goals). The second perspective has to do with the education system (i.e., the extent with which the education system did a good job of preparing all students on IEPs for the next step in life beyond school). While it is important to be able to measure and determine both perspectives, the current emphasis in special education is clearly on system measurement—the special education system demonstrating, through rigorous research, postschool results and improvement.

I believe the current emphasis in special education is on system measurement versus individual student measurement for these reasons:

- 1) There are now new requirements for State Performance Plans (SPPs), including indicators. Indicator 14 in the SPP speaks directly to the issue of measurability and postsecondary goals.

Indicator # 14

Percent of youth who had IEPs, are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both within one year of leaving high school.

States are now required to conduct follow-up studies on IEP school leavers one year out. The first year for this data will be based on the 2005–2006 school leavers, and this data will establish a baseline of results in employment, education, and training. This data will then be collected annually for each new group of students who are no longer in secondary school and who have been competitively employed, enrolled in some type of postsecondary school, or both within one year of leaving high school. I anticipate that the baseline data from 2005–2006 leavers will be used as a yardstick to measure improvement or slippage against findings from subsequent years.

- 2) We know that only one year out, most students with disabilities, as well as regular students, may not have actually achieved a desired postsecondary goal but may be working toward the achievement of that goal. For the achievement of a measurable postsecondary goal in employment where the student desires to be a teacher, computer technician, etc., they may not achieve that employment goal one year out but are working towards the goal. They may be enrolled in a postsecondary two-year/four-year college or vocational training program. They would demonstrate measurable achievement in either postsecondary education or training because they are currently enrolled in postsecondary education but may not in employment.

The point is, if the development of “measurable postsecondary goals” was most importantly about the individual student’s postsecondary goals, then we would design a system that would follow the student beyond just one year out. One-year-out data will not provide an accurate picture of an individual student’s achievement of their postsecondary goals, but it will provide a baseline and subsequent year-to-year data on the education system. For instance, a state or local district follow up baseline results for 2005–2006 leavers shows that since leaving high school, the percentage of students that have *worked AT ANY TIME in any of the following* is as follows:

- 5% in a *sheltered* employment setting that is only for workers with disabilities
- 5% in a *supported* employment program in a community or competitive work setting
- 10% in a *family member’s home or business*
- 60% in a *competitive* employment setting *for pay*
- 10% in a *competitive* employment setting as a *volunteer or in a training capacity*

- 10% in the *military*

Since this is first year data for the 2005-2006 leavers, this data would be considered the baseline. I anticipate that states and districts will then be measured against their baseline data and asked to explain either improvement or slippage from the baseline. This is what I believe will be measured and what measurable postsecondary goals will focus on.

- 3) The newly funded National Post School Outcome Center (NPSO)—States now need to collect and use data on postsecondary education and employment status of youth with disabilities (SPP Indicator #14). While some states have such systems in place, others do not and are seeking guidance on how to collect those data, as well as how to analyze and use the data to improve programs and student outcomes.

To support states in those activities, and assist them in meeting reporting requirements, OSEP has funded the National PSO Center to:

- Develop practical, efficient, cost-effective, and sustainable strategies for collecting and using data to improve secondary, transition, and post-secondary outcomes for youth with disabilities; and
- Identify state needs and provide technical assistance that will result in improved systems for post-school outcome data collection and use.

The NPSO Center has done an excellent job in assisting states on designing tools and methodology on the collection, analysis, and use of the data. However, this center is not, nor was it, designed to follow individual students and report on individual student postsecondary goal achievement over time. This is evident when one looks at the draft protocol instruments (Tier 1 and Tier 2 protocols) that states can use. The protocols are a part of the NPSO “ToolKit,” which features documents to assist in establishing practical and rigorous data collection systems to measure the postschool outcomes of youth with disabilities. The protocols offer questions that form the minimum recommendations to address federal reporting requirements. If states have their own follow-up study then the instruments and methodology must be submitted to OSEP. It is anticipated that state follow-up instruments and methodology would be aligned with the NPSO efforts to ensure consistency in data collection nationally. The NPSO Center protocols address three of the four required IEP measurable postsecondary goal areas. Those are education, training, and employment. Independent living, while one of the measurable postsecondary goal areas is not included as a part of the follow-up data collection because it is not a part of Indicator 14. Independent living is a postsecondary goal area “where it is determined to be appropriate” by the

IEP team. The inclusion of independent living as a measurable postsecondary goal area on an IEP should be based upon individual IEP team decisions, is included on IEPs where appropriate, and is not a universal measurable postsecondary goal area. I believe that since independent living is not a universal measurable postsecondary goal area for all students, it is not a postsecondary goal area that will be followed nor measured and thus not a part of either Tier 1 or Tier 2 protocol questions at this time.

Again, the measurable data that will be generated through the NPSO Center technical assistance will be systems data and not individual student data over time. This type of data will be very helpful for education systems to measure systems improvement or slippage from baseline and identify areas where programs and efforts need to improve.

If the rationale above holds true and states choose to use the NPSO protocol, then we know “what” will be measured at a minimum (NPSO Center Tier 1 protocol questions) and “when” it will be measured (one year out). If educators know what will be measured, then it would seem reasonable that, in writing measurable postsecondary goals, educators make sure that the operative words that are the basis for what will be measured are used in the writing of student “measurable postsecondary goals.”

NPSO Center Draft Protocols—Operative Words

Employment—work at any time since leaving high school

- *Sheltered employment* (only for workers with a disability)
- *Supported employment* (in a community or competitive work setting)
- *Family member’s home or business*
- *Competitive employment* for pay
- *Competitive employment* as a volunteer or in a training capacity
- *Military*

Other employment questions that will be asked have to do with number of hours working per week (gradients from 1–40 hours), typical hourly wage (unpaid, less than minimum, minimum, more than minimum), and whether health insurance is provided (yes or no).

NPSO Center Draft Protocols—Operative Words

Postsecondary education/training—enrolled in at any time since leaving high school

- *High school completion document or certificate* (Adult Basic Education, G.E.D)

- *Short-term education or employment training program* (WIA, Job Corps, etc.)
- *Vocational Technical School*—less than a two-year program
- *Community or Technical College* (two-year college)
- *College/University* (4-year college)

Other postsecondary education/training questions have to do with whether the person is currently enrolled in any of the above and whether the person is/was enrolled part-time or full-time.

Should measurable postsecondary goals be specific?

IDEA 2004 requires that measurable postsecondary goals must be in the IEP of every child beginning no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child is 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP team. There has been no discussion or decision on how specific those postsecondary goals must be. It would seem reasonable that the first time a postsecondary goal is written (regardless of age—16 or younger), the student may not know what they want to do, or they have some ideas that may need to be refined. The intent of transition planning is to work with the student, family and IEP team to begin early to think about what the student wants to do after high school (e.g., postsecondary goals) and design a set of courses, activities and linkages needed to help the student achieve those desired postsecondary goals. Each year the IEP team should reassess, adjust and refine the:

- measurable postsecondary goals
- the coursework (course of study)
- the coordinated activities (strategies or steps in the long-range plan), and
- the linkages to needed post school services, supports or programs.

The reassessing, adjusting and refining of the transition services should ensure the student is on track to achieve their measurable postsecondary goals.

I believe that in writing measurable postsecondary goals, the first year, or possibly the first several years, the goals may be broad descriptions of the student's preferences, interests, or vision of what they might like to do in employment, education, training, and independent living. While they may begin broad, every effort should be made to help the student begin to plan for and narrow employment, further education, training and independent living preferences and interests. This includes developing their courses of study to include career exploration to assist in career decision making and identifying courses that will meet the course requirements for postsecondary education or training.

If the measurable postsecondary goal discussion doesn't begin until 15 or 16 years of age, it is likely decisions regarding high school courses have already been made which have a direct impact on postsecondary options (four-year

college, community or technical college). That is why the transition services discussion and decision making needs to begin early and not later than the last year of middle school. While the postsecondary goals may initially be broad, one should see progress or movement toward helping the student become refined in stating their desired postsecondary goals over time. It should be expected that by the last year in school, the measurable postsecondary goals would be specific and thus measurable one year out. The last year or last IEP is the most critical point in time regarding how measurable postsecondary goals are written. I believe this because I believe that the final measurable postsecondary goals in the IEP will be recorded as a part of the SPP student exit survey (last semester in school) and compared to the information gathered as a part of the post school follow-up survey one year out. If one is specific when writing the postsecondary goals in the final IEP, then they will be much easier to measure to show results.

Here are some examples. You decide which of the postsecondary goal statements is measurable one year out.

Measurable Postsecondary Goal Examples

Training Goal

Something in emergency medical services.

Or

I am planning on enrolling in an Emergency Medical Technician training program and working for the fire department, hospital, or ambulance service.

Education Goal

Go to some program in computers.

Or

I am planning on enrolling full time at the XYZ Community College and obtain an associates degree in computer networking.

Employment Goal

Something in computers.

Or

I would like to work as computer technician repairing computers or developing and maintaining computer networks.

Independent Living Skills Goal

On my own.

Or

I would like to live independently in my own apartment or home.

Notice that for some of the measurable postsecondary goal statements, operative words from the NPSO Tier 1 Protocol are a part of the goal statement (e.g., enrolling, full time, work). Using the wording from the NPSO Protocol for employment, training, and education will make the postsecondary goal

statements easier to measure and thus easier to demonstrate results. Also, notice that some of the postsecondary goal statements are written in the “first person.” First person statements individualize the statement and indicate it is the student’s postsecondary goal and not something written by an IEP team member.

Must there be a measurable postsecondary goal in each of the areas of education, training, employment and, where appropriate, independent living skills?

No. Obviously, if a measurable postsecondary goal is not appropriate in independent living skills, then one would not be written. Additionally, it is not necessary to have a measurable postsecondary goal for each area of education, training, or employment. For instance, if a young man’s measurable postsecondary goal in employment is to work full time in partnership with his father on their farm and not go on for any further education or training, then it would seem reasonable that there would not be a measurable postsecondary goal in either education or training. However, if he wanted to enroll in a community college and receive an associates degree in agri-business while he works with his father then there would be both a measurable postsecondary goal in employment (work part-time on the family farm) and education (enroll at XYZ community college to obtain and associates degree in agri-business).

Are “measurable postsecondary goals” the same as “measurable annual goals”?

No. The IEP for ALL students must include a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals. For students beginning with the first IEP to be in effect when the child is 16, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEP team, their IEP must also include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals.

Summary

There will continue to be a great deal of discussion around the topic of measurable postsecondary goals. It is critical that if teachers are going to develop and write meaningful and results driven transition services in IEP’s they need to have a clear understanding of what they must do along with explanations and examples showing them how to do it. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate further discussion and result in further clarification so teachers can be successful and students will receive the transition services they need.